

Women's Motivations for Political Participation

by

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Introduction

While gender gaps in some forms of political participation have narrowed in recent years, others have remained¹. Women and men vote and volunteer for political campaigns with similar frequency but gaps persist in the political interest, knowledge, and efficacy of women as compared to men, despite improvements in women's resources like education and income. If improvements in women's resources have not narrowed the gendered gap in political participation is there another cause for their persistence?

This paper uses data from focus groups with women to understand some of the nuanced experiences of these women with respect to their political interest, knowledge, and efficacy. While we know that women are less interested in politics than men, what is it that women view as political and what do they say they are politically interested in? What do women say they want to know, or wish to have (ie. resources), before they undertake a different level of political participation?

Literature on the gendered differences in political participation

Existing literature find that women tend to be less interested in politics, demonstrate lower levels of political knowledge, and express lower feelings of external efficacy, or the power to affect the political system, than do men (Erickson and O'Neill, 2002; Gidengil et al., 2006). The consequences of these gaps can mean women are more hesitant to express their political preferences. Such hesitancy to express political preferences can lead to less representation for substantial portions of the population. It is for this reason that a fuller understanding of women's motivations for political participation is necessary.

The fact that gender differences in political participation exist is well established. The reasons for the gender differences is generally accounted for by one or more of the following explanations: women are less likely to have the resources to participate (education, income, socio-economic status, and time); women lack the social capital needed to use their networks for political gains; and women are socialized from childhood to see their caring labour as contrary to political participation.

Resources are obviously important to women's participation. In both Canadian and American studies one resource, education, has been identified as the single most important predictor of political interest, political knowledge, and willingness to participate (see Gidengil et al. 2004; Verba, Schlozman, and Burns 1997; Koch 1997). Education is thought to be the great equalizer for women as it is important for improving other resources such as income and socio-economic status. These resources, which have

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seen improvements over the last few decades, remain ones in which women continue to lag behind men. Women in Canada are still more likely to be part time workers, be employed in precarious labour², and have an income that is between 79% and 85% of men's (Drolet, 2001).

Education is an important resource and a key predictor for political participation but it is not sufficient to explain the gender differences in participation. Gidengil et al. (2004: 49-50) explain that women with post-secondary education still only perform as well as men who did not complete high school in terms of political knowledge. The persistence of the gender difference in knowledge, despite education, indicates that there is another factor at play.

Women's time commitments have also been blamed for lower participation rates. Women are more likely to provide the caring labour required in a family. This caring labour is usually the care of children but also includes housework, care of elderly relatives, and even pet care. Despite the double-day of most employed women, Gidengil et al. (2004: 52) found that women's caring labour did not appear to explain gender differences in political knowledge as women without children were no more likely than women with children to have higher levels of political knowledge. The burden of caring labour is not sufficient to explain differences between women and men with respect to political knowledge but the caring burden may be part of a woman's decision to enter political life. In a striking piece of research, Lawless and Fox (2005) asked people in high-level careers, that they called "pipelines" for political careers, who in the family was responsible for caring labour. Even amongst female academics, lawyers, and business people, women were "twelve times more likely than men to bear responsibility for the majority of household tasks, and about ten times more likely to be the primary child care provider" (Lawless and Fox, 2005:62). The burden of caring labour may be a personal factor in a woman's choice to become an active political participant.

Another group of explanations for the gender gap in political participation is social capital, or civic engagement. Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* identified a shift in society in which social networks have weakened and people are "bowling alone". Putnam's work has triggered much research on civic engagement, but also a strong feminist critique.

Since one of the primary ways we build social networks is in the workplace, women are at a disadvantage in terms of social capital because of the fewer hours women work outside the home. Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001:360-1) acknowledge that workplaces are excellent places to learn important civic skills and build networks but women remain at a disadvantage. The increasing amount of precarious labour amongst women also serves to decrease opportunities for building social capital, which contributes to feelings of isolation (Barter Moulaison, 2003). Gidengil et al. (2003) offered a

² Precarious labour is a term used to describe work that is not "full-time with benefits". It includes work that is contract, on-call, part-time, temporary, seasonal, or work in which people hold more than one job (multi-tracking).

Canadian perspective on social capital and found that while women and men have comparable levels of social capital, men seem to get more political information from that social capital than women do.

The third explanation for gender gaps, socialization, is the manner by which we learn to behave in our cultural environment. From childhood we are unconscious recipients of many cues, norms, and patterns that help us to adapt to our environment. Political socialization involves the implicit transmission of political cues, norms, and practices. In one study, Verba, Burns, and Schlozman (1997:1056) reported that men are somewhat more likely to report being interested in politics, are more likely to report they frequently discuss politics, and more likely to indicate that they enjoy political discussion. Such differences may be accounted for by political socialization. Women may be receiving cues that politics is not appropriate for women so they indicate lower levels of interest, knowledge, and political efficacy.

Methodology

Most work on gender gaps in political participation use large-scale surveys to assess women's political behaviours, political knowledge, political interest, and political efficacy. While large-scale surveys prove to be excellent at tracking the trends in these gender gaps, they do not provide the tools to do satisfactory analysis on the causes of these gender gaps. While we can quantify the gender gaps, we have not yet produced a satisfactory answer to explain why they endure. Another approach, focus groups, offer a potentially useful way to examine what factors influence these gender gaps – factors that cannot be captured or measured in questionnaires and surveys. Focus groups might then be the correct approach to capture the role of factors such as motherhood, gender roles and the absence of political models.

In the first half of 2007, Womanspace Resource Centre in Lethbridge, AB contracted me to conduct focus groups with women in rural, southern Alberta in order to probe their ideas of political participation, political interest, political knowledge, and political efficacy. The focus groups were conducted with established groups of women. The group leaders were contacted for permission to conduct a focus group with the members of the group and the focus groups were held during regularly scheduled meeting times in order to ensure maximum participation. Existing groups of women provide a pool of women who may not otherwise attend a focus group on politics or respond to an advertisement for focus groups participants. Existing groups were also utilized in order to create an environment in which the women were comfortable to express their feelings and opinions freely, without concern for the manner in which strangers might view their political opinions or knowledge.

Eight groups with a total of 61 women were conducted. Some of the groups were neighborhood preschool co-ops, some were church-based social justice groups, and some were groups with shared recreational interests. The vast majority of the women were mothers who ranged in age from 18 to 74. Half the groups were held in Lethbridge and

half were held in surrounding small towns³. Each focus group was conducted using a semi-structured interview process with open-ended questions⁴. The women were asked to describe their level of political interest and discuss what political issues most affected them. They were asked about their political participation and their reasons for either engaging or not engaging in political behaviours.

Throughout this paper I will draw on the responses of the women in those groups in order to provide a different understanding of political participation. Many of the women interviewed knew more about politics than they realized and their lives provided evidence of political activity even though they did not define their actions in that way.

Defining political participation from a feminist perspective

Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001: 57-59) engage in a lengthy discussion on distinguishing political from non-political activity and conclude that political activities are those which “seek to influence either directly or indirectly what the government does.” This narrow definition places “managing the church soup kitchen” and “funding cancer research” as non-political activities (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001:58). Such a definition seems particularly problematic for feminist scholarship. Feminism has long told us that “the personal is political” and feminist political science, Jill Vickers (1997) reminds us, requires us to broaden our definitions of the “political”. A woman’s labour in a church soup kitchen may appear to be domestic and apolitical until the context of the act is taken into account. The act of providing food to the poor is one that is fraught with political meaning as it can be seen to articulate the failure of government policy or as an act of anarchists, as the Food Not Bombs activists have been labeled when they offer food to homeless people in inner city neighborhoods. The act of providing food to the poor, whether done with an intention to influence government activity or not, is an act of political participation.

Other authors have offered broader definitions of political participation than Burns, Schlozman, and Verba. Thomas and Young (2006) use voting, membership in an interest group, and membership in a political party. O’Neill and Everitt (2002:5) define political behaviour as “the range of actions undertaken and attitudes held by individuals in connection with the social organization and decision-making structures of the state in both its formal and informal manifestations.” Burt (2002) provides an excellent history of the term political participation in her chapter “The Concept of Political Participation” in which she differentiates between the “instrumental” and “expressive” dimensions of

³ Women were asked to complete a consent form (Appendix 1) and a knowledge quiz (Appendix 2) before the group was formally started. Participants were told Womanspace Resource Centre would use their answers. Since the use of their information in this paper represents a new use for the data I have received permission from Womanspace Resource Centre and an Ethics approval from the University of Calgary.

⁴ Beyond responding to the first question about their name and level of political interest, responses were not required.

participation. Using Burt's categories the work in a soup kitchen would not be a form of instrumental participation, as it is unlikely to have an impact on public policy, but it could be on the expressive dimension if the individual involved perceives that the activity could have an impact on public policy.

Shirin M. Rai, writing for the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, incorporates a broad and location-based understanding of political participation. Rai borrows four measures of political participation from a U.K. Electoral Commission Report: voting; campaign oriented activities (donating money to a party, working for a party, contacting a politician, etc); civic-oriented activities (membership in groups, unions, and associations); and cause oriented activities (signing petitions, boycotts and buycotts⁵, marches, and protests, etc.) (2005:9). These "political acts" are united by the fact that "all actions take place in the public sphere as opposed to the private, or involve (writing a cheque for a campaign or a political party) engaging with a public organisation or institution" (Rai, 2005: 9). This definition does not require the intentionality of the individual but calls activities political if they are located in the public sphere. In this way, the volunteer at a soup kitchen is most definitely engaged in political activity, even if she does not define it that way.

The difficulty with defining political participation broadly is that some acts, like driving a vehicle, could be classified political simply because it occurs in the public sphere. The mere location of an activity does not make it political. The other feature that must be included is the context. Abu-Laban (2002) calls on us to incorporate people's "*own definitions of their political engagement*" rather than working from pre-established definitions" (279, emphasis in original) and to use qualitative as well as quantitative methods to go beyond our traditional definitions of political participation. Abu-Laban's example is that of Vancouver area Chinese business people who do an annual tree-planting campaign. She argues tree planting "should be viewed as a political act" (278) because of the local political context with respect to Chinese people and land use. While planting a tree in most contexts would be no more political than driving a car, in the context of concerns over foreign owned lands the act is political. The need to know the political context and the location of an act in order to classify it as a "political act" makes data gathering complicated and requires qualitative research to ascertain the political context.

Whether or not a person intends for their act to be political, the act itself may be political because of the location and the context. A subject's intentionality is not necessary for an act to be political because the public location and the political context can make it political. One woman in the focus groups, Amy⁶, discussed her decision to have an unattended home-birth instead of a hospital-birth in a province that does not cover the

⁵ Buycotts are the opposite of boycotts. In a buycott consumers seek to purchase items to show their psychological attachment to a cause or issue. Fair-trade coffee is one of the best examples of this kind of consumer-oriented political participation.

⁶ To protect the anonymity of the participants in the study I have assigned each a pseudonym. No other details have been altered.

cost of midwifery services. In this excerpt from the focus groups we hear an exchange between Amy, a mother of four who claims to have no interest in politics and no TV or newspapers in the home, and me (the interviewer).

Amy: When I was pregnant with my third child I wanted a home birth with a midwife. But in Alberta I would have to pay for that. It's like the government says to me, "you are too poor to afford choices" because I have no income because my husband has been a student since I met him. I have no money so I have no choice but to have a hospital birth. I wanted to birth at home so I had to do it unattended. Nobody but my husband was there. And there was talk of a law being written that if you're in the room when someone is giving birth you could be charged – I wanted to lock myself in a MP's office and say you wanna charge people for attending a birth? We had so much trouble getting a birth certificate when I birthed her at home. This is how I rock the boat but it doesn't make a difference. I shocked every health care worker I came across by birthing non-traditionally.

Interviewer: So many things you are doing are political acts. Even the act of giving birth at home was a radical, political act. Do you see your actions as political actions?

Amy: When you say it's a political action it feels like it makes a difference. I don't see my life as a political action, but if I did it would be more empowering.

While a home birth may at first appear to be a personal choice, Amy knew the political context and wanted to challenge the norm of a hospital birth. She opposed the limited access to midwifery care and the reliance on obstetrician-led births in her town. While she did not see her home birth as political, and it was most certainly in a non-public sphere, the context of her act made it political. In addition, when the facilitator identified the political nature of her act for her, she expressed that she felt more empowered.

The broad definition of political participation employed by Rai (2005) and Abu-Laban (2002) are important for feminist scholars to incorporate, as it will allow women's everyday acts, and extraordinary acts, to be counted as political acts. The gender gap in political participation cannot be entirely explained by the definition of what is political, but a broader definition will capture more evidence of women's participation.

Explanations for the remaining gender gap

While redefining what is political may capture more of women's activities and label them political, it will not explain away the gendered gaps in political participation. The three main explanations, resources, social capital, and political socialization must also be explored.

In the focus groups, women did mention resources, especially time, as a barrier to their political participation. A 38-year old named Janice who lived in a small town and worked full time in a public service job explained succinctly what many others discussed about their resources:

Why don't I get involved? Time, time, time. My first priority is my family, not politics. It would be such a big effort and it would take away from my family.

Another woman in the same group countered, "Let's be honest, even if I had all the time in the world I would not choose to use the time on political things. It just isn't on my list (Jenny, aged 23)." This comment points to the relative importance of politics in the lives of some women. Politics may never be a priority for women like this and the excuse of time is used instead of admitting a lack of interest in politics. As women have increased their participation in post-secondary education and seen income and socio-economic status increase, gender gaps in political interest have persisted.

Since the focus groups were conducted only with women it is not possible to explore the gendered difference in political interest but there was a persistent lack of political interest among the participants. Each focus group started with the question, "What is your name and how interested would you say you are in politics?" Women expressed trepidation in answering the second part of the question. One woman explained it was "just not comfortable to talk about politics" and another mentioned that their group never talked about "controversial things" like politics or religion. The vast majority of women described themselves as having little interest in politics, though at least one in each group expressed a medium to high level of interest. This indicated that the women were comfortable enough in the group to express a difference of opinion on this subject. Most women noted that they spoke about politics only a few times a year and fewer than 10% said they spoke about politics daily. Interest in politics seemed to be affected by cynical views of politics and politicians.

The whole process seems ineffective. Nothing gets done for the time invested. I want a return on my investment. It seems so hopeless to try to make changes here. I would just rather give my time and money to organizations that do work overseas. (Anna, aged 26)

I can't vote. Every political party is just out for themselves. (Simone, aged 25)

O'Neill (2002: 45) notes that women may choose to engage in politics for "the ends the process provides" while men may be as likely to engage for the "process of power as for its outcomes." This discomfort amongst women for the process of politics is evident in the reasons women expressed for their dislike of politics. Women in the focus groups described the process of politics as "a bunch of two year olds fighting", "every political party out for themselves", "boring", "ridiculous", "baiting, not debating", "calling names" and "a complete waste of time". Each woman who described politics in this way added that they were not just "*not interested*" in politics but that they had made a choice to disengage from politics because of the tone. As a 27-year old woman in a small town explained, "I don't vote and I don't get involved. I feel better not being a part of it at all."

When asked about whether they had ever considered running for elected office of any kind almost all rejected the idea outright. Their reasons provide some insight into where their interests do lie.

I wouldn't run because I'd hurt a lot of feelings. You change as a person when you become a politician. It's a big game and it changes people's perspectives. (38 yr old)

I just would never run for office, even if I had lots of time. I would rather volunteer for a non-profit and give back. I don't see politics as something that gives back. It is a necessary evil. Some people are interested in politics and they should be involved but it's not for me. (41 yr old)

Women in the focus groups expressed a lack of interest in politics and they frequently expressed a rejection of politics because of their perception that it did not fit with their personality, manner of social interaction, and worldview. Politics was something that other people engaged in and it was better that they knew as little of it as possible.

When it came to political knowledge the women in the focus groups were generally willing to admit that they knew little and were better off as a result. Unfortunately, they are not better off. Political knowledge is the political information that informs our decisions about voting and other forms of political participation and it informs our policy preferences and political opinions. If people lack political knowledge, they are less capable of constructing coherent policy preferences and political opinions.

Political knowledge is often measured with questions that assess knowledge of individual actors (names of the Prime Minister and Premier), knowledge of party orientations on a left-right scale, and other general knowledge (the capital city of Canada). In the Womanspace Study I chose knowledge questions (see Appendix 2) about individuals as well as a current event issue because the study was not conducted during an election⁷. While 90% of participants could correctly name the Prime Minister of Canada (Stephen Harper), only 75% could name the party that had won the last election (Conservative) and only 51% could correctly identify with which country Canada was at war. These results meant the women were similar to other Canadians who Fournier (2002:104) classified as "moderately knowledgeable" but not up to "the standards of traditional democratic theory". More disturbing than their moderate levels of political knowledge was the fact that most of the women underestimated their knowledge and said their lack of knowledge impedes their participation.

I'd like to run for town council, but what if they found out I know nothing?
(31 year old with a graduate degree)

⁷ Canadian data on political knowledge is generally drawn from Canada Elections Studies that are conducted during election campaigns when both more information is available and people are more likely to pay attention to it.

It is hard to have an opinion. I don't think the news gives us the whole story. I don't know who to believe. (35 year old)

My father-in-law tells me how to vote. He just overwhelms me. I like history but I can't wrap my brain around how things work today. I know I'm weak. I ordered Time and Maclean's and I force my way through the articles. (29 year old)

I only know what my 12 year old brings home from school. And I ask my 90-year old aunt who to vote for. (34 year old)

Canadians generally appear politically uniformed (O'Neill 2006: 17) but for women that lack of information is more pronounced and appears to be "domain-specific" according to Verba, Burns, and Schlozman (1997: 1064) who conclude that "women don't know less about everything; they just know less about politics." For the women in the focus groups their poor estimation of their own knowledge meant they were reluctant to be active political participants. Their sense that they would have to know much more than they did in order to be a participant in the political process held them back from the process. The women also tended to express a resignation to the status quo and a feeling that they could not affect politics at all.

This is not all that surprising, as political efficacy, or the sense that you could affect decision-making at some level, is generally low amongst Canadians. Low levels of efficacy mean that people are unlikely to expend energy in political participation. Few of the women in the focus groups had experience in political activism and most expressed concern about the value of participation. A woman with some experience in activism spoke of the failure of her activism.

When health care premiums were introduced, we held so many protests, but nothing happened. It makes me feel helpless so why bother taking time to write a letter? Who's going to listen? (39 year old)

Two of the youngest women were from small towns and expressed their limited sense of internal efficacy.

(My hometown) feels like an old boy's club. It is intimidating. There are not many women in politics. It is hard to be taken seriously. How do we get women interested and is it really worth it? Women would know where I'm coming from. It is always the same types that end up in positions of power. It would feel so different if more women were on town council. Not even just females but more variety of people. (21 yr old)

I'd feel like such an idiot or get bulldozed if I went to a town meeting. I might start but when I was hit with resistance I would just walk away. I would get bulldozed into feeling their way instead of maintaining my own beliefs. I would give up. I know that about myself. (22 yr old)

For some women their sense of diminished political efficacy is a result of failed attempts in the past but for many of the women they expressed powerlessness because the issues seemed too large or the resolutions would be too far into the future. Many of the women lacked any post-secondary education, but a startling minority had post-secondary education and still expressed low levels of efficacy. Many simply resisted political solutions.

Maybe we don't need power. Maybe we need to work at grassroots levels rather than getting into positions of power. I would talk to people on the street, volunteer at a women's organization, be a part of groups. I feel like I make more of a difference being part of activist routes. (21 yr old post-secondary student)

I do things at home about the environment but I don't feel that I can change policy at all. I wouldn't know where to start. (38 yr old with post-secondary education)

I was very involved when the hospital in our town was being closed down. We had petitions and huge rallies. We did everything we could but it closed anyways. Now I just feel powerless. (35 yr old with post-secondary education)

One other reason for low efficacy was expressed in the focus groups: fear. Fear of repercussions for speaking out or being politically active was primarily identified in the focus group conducted with young single mothers at an alternative high school. These young women struggled with poverty as all but one depended on welfare payments to survive. Verba, Burns, and Schlozman (1997: 1056) found that women were no more fearful than men to take a "public stand on controversial issues" but they did find that one in 5 people say they are somewhat or very worried about taking a public stance.

Poorer people have more to fear from authorities and may feel they cannot afford to speak out. When the group of young mothers was asked about their political participation they expressed a great deal of fear, much of it around the reaction they would get from welfare workers and bosses, people on whom they depend for the little bit of money they live on. "I can't speak out or be involved in anything because I need help. My worker might get mad at me," explained 20-year old Sherri. The group detailed a litany of complaints about their lives including poverty, violence, and difficulties accessing affordable housing, childcare, and transportation but they saw the solution to the problems in relational terms, "The welfare workers should be nicer, more compassionate," said Sherri. "My [welfare] worker told me to call her when I had the baby but then she made fun of the name I gave my son," offered Melanie, a 19-year old. These young women did not see the systemic issues at play in their lives because they were mired in personal issues and wished for a kinder worker, not a more humane system. Their lack of resources and low efficacy limited their political participation.

Overall, the women overwhelmingly identified their perceived time constraints, their perceived lack of knowledge, and their perception that politics was not something that

people like them participated in, as the reasons they did not participate politically beyond voting⁸.

Moreover, the women in these focus groups were concerned about many issues that were political but they perceived the problems, and therefore the solutions, to be non-political. In one group a lengthy environmental discussion ensued and the women expressed a desire for their town to be free of plastic bags. When I suggested some towns had passed bylaws to do just that, they scoffed and suggested it would be easier to ask the storeowners to stop using so many and to educate shoppers about using cloth bags. They saw no role for any level of government or even an organized group to tackle such an issue. They perceived the use of plastic bags as a private matter.

Private matters can have public implications, however, as argued previously with regards to Amy, a woman who chose an unattended home birth. If women view their world as being apolitical then they seek no political solutions to their problems. This orientation to the private sphere is not to say that women lack a political orientation and have no interest in the public sphere. Rather, the orientation is a set of glasses that women wear that colors the way they approach life. It is to this orientation that we now turn.

Women's orientations

Sapiro (1982:266) found that women's political participation is "shaped in part by family roles" and that women take family responsibilities into account and either rearrange or give up their political activities so as not to cause conflict with their family responsibilities. She concluded that men felt some conflict between their public and private lives but women did not because "women reduce conflict by avoiding taking on public commitments" (Sapiro 1982: 274). Caizza (2006) studied ways to help women express their political opinions and take political action. In her work with religious groups in the US, Caizza found a tendency for women to reject leadership and feel uncomfortable with the nature of political discussion.

Women often described a hesitation to claim authority, particularly in politics, because it feels uncomfortable or inappropriate for them to do so. For many, their hesitations are wrapped up in more general hesitations to take on leadership—a discomfort with a public role of authority. But for many others, there was or is resistance to thinking of political activism as appropriate to their lives as women.... Acting on anger can be seen as violating an ethic of care, collaboration, or peace that they think is more appropriate to themselves as women. (Caizza 2006:10)

Women in the focus groups were certainly reluctant to speak with any kind of authority on the issues they discussed and described political discussions as difficult because as

⁸ Interestingly, 85% of the women claimed to have voted in the last federal election (held nearly two years before they were asked). The time since the election is the most likely explanation for the apparent overrepresentation of voters in the focus groups.

one explained, “I just see both sides. It’s not black and white to me. I can’t decide who to believe,” (Maria, aged 60).

In some of the groups the questions about political actions began to affect the women’s descriptions of their actions. Women who had initially expressed very little interest in politics began to express opinions and indicate issues of importance to them that they had previously considered apolitical. This was most obvious in the above exchange with Amy who began to see her home birth as a political act when asked if she saw it that way. The naming of a woman’s act as political gives her a different perspective on her actions. Similarly, the discussion of political action generally seemed to spark a latent interest in the women, which manifested in lengthy discussions about controversial political topics.

Many of the groups expressed an interest in maintaining contact with Womanspace Resource Centre and in continuing discussions of a political nature. It was as if the women needed to be granted permission to discuss politics. They also appeared to need a language and context in which to understand their own lives in political terms. Jean Bethke Elshtain identified a similar need in her book *Public Man, Private Woman*. Elshtain called on feminist scholars to “first *locate* the female subject in creating a feminist political theory *for* and *about* her,” then to have the subject explore “her life-world” and bring voice to previously silenced “dimensions of her daily existence” which will then require an “analyst’s rendering of those self-descriptions in a manner which makes them more widely and generally accessible by assimilating them into a theoretical framework that gives them explanatory power at a more abstract level of understanding,” (1981:304 emphasis in the original) Elshtain called this a “part-whole-part hermeneutic” because to interpret behaviour one must first break the silence of experience, abstract it for explanatory purposes, and then take it back to the subject to explain their behaviour in the context of a larger socio-economic organization. Elshtain called for a reconstructive ideal of the private sphere so that women’s experiences are not negated and made to be inferior to those of men’s in the public sphere. The focus group experience in this study provides some support for such an ideal. When women were encouraged to perceive their world using political language they tended to accept it and appeared to be able to describe themselves as political beings more willingly.

Conclusion

While this study offers no definitive explanation for persistent gender gaps in political participation it does point to some intriguing possible explanations. The role of political socialization appeared strongest in the focus group participant’s self-descriptions of their political interest and knowledge. The women underestimated their knowledge and described themselves as having little or no interest in politics. For most women in the groups politics was something outside their lives and not something in which they could see themselves participate. Despite this, most of the women were capable of identifying important issues in their lives, from child care to the environment, which they felt needed some kind of improvement. Unfortunately, the kinds of improvements they sought were often piecemeal and too small to effect any real changes. They rarely envisioned political

solutions to the issues they saw as important. Given the apparent role of socialization in the women's responses, further research into the political socialization of women could offer some explanations for the persistence of the gender gap.

For feminists who wish to increase women's political participation, this study appears to offer some direction. By locating woman's experiences, giving voice to their experiences, and reframing those private acts as having public implications, feminist activists and scholars could offer a different way of understanding women's political participation. By locating and contextualizing women's acts we could define many more things as "political participation" or "political acts". A home birth, the purchase of fair trade coffee, and a woman's provision of unpaid caring labour in the home all have profound public policy implications. At their heart each of these acts rejects elements of the dominant culture and envisions that a different world is possible. As long as these acts are considered non-political then their potential for improving women's internal efficacy and political interest remains small. Once the acts are named political, then women can perceive their private choices as having broader political consequences and can see the intersections of politics and their lives.

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Appendix 1

Consent Form

You have been asked to participate in a focus group on women's political participation conducted by a contracted facilitator from Womanspace Resource Centre in Lethbridge. Womanspace conducts these focus groups in order to learn more about the differences between men's and women's political participation and the reasons why women choose to get involved or not get involved in political behaviours. Your name, and identifying details, is kept confidential. If we use some of your comments we will do so by assigning a pseudonym and use your actual age (eg. Sally, aged 33). We use this data in public presentations, written presentations, and in research documents that are used in our local, provincial, and national advocacy activities. We thank you for your contribution to our work. We value your time so you have been provided a \$25 honorarium. By signing this consent form you are agreeing to be part of this focus group and for your comments to be recoded. You are also confirming that you received the honorarium. You can participate as little or as much as you wish and you may leave at any time.

Name

Signature

Date

Appendix 2

Knowledge test for focus groups

Your age _____

1. Please name the Prime Minister of Canada. _____
2. What political party is he the leader of?
 - a. Liberal
 - b. Conservative
 - c. NDP
 - d. Bloc
 - e. Green
3. The last federal election was held January 23, 2006.
Which party won? _____
4. Did you vote in the last federal election (if you were old enough to do so)? Y N
5. If you did not vote, why not? _____
6. Do you belong to a political party? _____
7. Do you know anyone that belongs to a political party? _____
8. Canada currently has troops at war in what country/countries:
 - a. United States
 - b. Syria
 - c. Afghanistan
 - d. Iraq
9. How often do you read a newspaper?
 - a. Every day
 - b. Once a week or more
 - c. Once a month or more
 - d. Never
10. How often do you talk about politics with your friends/co-workers/family?
 - a. Never
 - b. Rarely
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Frequently
 - e. Daily